

Not So Free Press

The lot of underground newspapers anywhere in the U.S. is a hard one, inasmuch as the papers often reflect a zest for rebellion and four-letter words. But the case of the *Street Journal* & *San Diego Free Press* is something special. Intelligible and far from salacious, it manages to denounce pollution and corruption without invoking Mao Tse-tung. It even recommended the family movie *Oliver!* to its readers while suggesting earplugs for the "pretentious dialogue" of drug-oriented *Easy Rider*.

But if the *Street Journal* is no average underground paper, neither is San Diego an average U.S. city. Largely a Navy town with a sizable segment of retired servicemen and retired civilians, San Diego is prototype John Birch country. Both of its daily papers, owned by James S. Copley, reflect the city's mood, emphasizing Navy activities, Rotary Club meetings and flag ceremonies—downplaying local black and Mexican-American problems. Copley papers will not even advertise, let alone review, X-rated films like *Midnight Cowboy*.

Smashed Typesetter. Founded in 1968 by a group of antiwar youngsters calling themselves "the People's Commune," the *Street Journal's* troubles began last October when it ran an article attacking Local Financier C. Arnold Smith. Essentially a rehash of a *Wall Street Journal* story, the underground weekly documented how Smith, some relatives and associates made large profits from transactions with two public companies he headed. The earnings of the companies were disappointing for ordinary stockholders.

In November, bullets were fired through the windows of the *Street Journal's* offices. The glass front door was smashed, and 2,500 copies of the paper (circ. 8,000) were stolen. On Christmas Day, typesetting equipment was smashed and filled with enamel paint. In January, a commune member's car was destroyed by fire-bombing while it was parked outside commune headquarters. Intimidating phone calls became common; some threatened death.

Nor have the San Diego police exactly ignored the *Street Journal*. During the past few months, they have searched its offices without a warrant and once arrested 25 of its vendors, mainly for "obstructing the sidewalk." Most such charges were dismissed. On one occasion a patrolman ordered a commune car towed away for violating an ordinance against parking more than 72 hours. He claimed that he had placed a stone on one of the tires, and it had not been dislodged in five days. The charge collapsed after it was shown that the car had been involved in a traffic violation three days earlier, seven miles from the parking site.

Lowell Bergman, 24, a commune leader with a master's degree in philosophy,

has initiated meetings with civic leaders, police and the state attorney general's office in an effort to ease relations with the police. He has had little success, even though a report prepared by the city manager affirmed that "a high percentage" of harassment complaints were unfounded. "In a few cases police officers had been provoked," the report added. "For example, a young man waved a Viet Cong flag in the face of a police officer who is a veteran of Viet Nam."

A rare note of sympathy for the commune has come from one of the two self-acknowledged liberals on the nine-man city council, but it holds no promise of easier times for the *Street Journal*. Says Democrat Floyd Morrow: "I can unequivocally state as a former prosecutor in the city attorney's office that there is police harassment in San Diego of anything regarded as anti-Establishment or anti-Copley or anti-Smith. And I think it's unfortunate but true that lots of people in San Diego would support the police in this situation."



LOWELL BERGMAN

In prototype Birch country.

MORI/CDF